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ABSTRACT

In 1996 the Internet evolved into a key information source for voters interested in experiencing an unfiltered view of the political process through the lenses of political parties, news organizations, educational foundations, media outlets, and a host of specialized interest groups (e.g., Common Cause, Sierra Club). This access came in the form of World Wide Web sites, Bulletin Boards, Gopher sites, Usenet groups, and access to political agents and agencies through a rapidly expanding system of electronic-mail access points. Travels on the information superhighway uncovered several prominent political websites, including those offered by the Democratic Party (DNC), Dole for President, the White House, and C-SPAN. Each site had its own structure and quality was variable. The "virtual library" is probably the most worthwhile subfile offered within the White House website because of its emphasis on political issues and Presidential policies. Overall, the C-SPAN website offers a good starting-point for anyone interested in researching issues and personalities associated with the American political system. The expansion of the Internet and the World Wide Web provides students and researchers of all stripes with information and news pertaining to a plethora of issues--it is clearly possible for students and other researchers to conduct political research on the Internet. (Contains 10 references.) (NKA)

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CAMPAIGN 96: A PERSPECTIVE ON CYBERSPACE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

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Campaign 96: A Perspective on Cyberspace Political Communication.

INTRODUCTION

The American political system is consistently characterized as a stagnant institution in need of substantive reform. Some political pundits contend that the two-party system offers voters an extremely limited menu of choices on election day. Others argue that the two major political parties (Democrats and Republicans) have merged philosophically and emerged singing a similar tune concerning most of the hot button, political issues including welfare reform, law and order, education reform, remodeling the system of taxation, and restoring a sense of moral order within our communities. Similarly, some members of the national media promote the notion that voters are not provided with enough objective information to make intelligent decisions at the ballot box. In 1996, however, this latter charge rings hollow for those individuals and communities who have reasonable access to the information-dense environment provided on the Internet.

The Internet has evolved into a key information source for voters interested in experiencing an unfiltered view of the political process through the lenses of political parties, news organizations, educational foundations, media outlets, and a host of specialized interest groups (e.g. Common Cause, Sierra Club). This access comes in the form of World Wide Web sites, Bulletin Boards, Gopher sites, Usenet groups, and access to

political agents and agencies through a rapidly expanding system of electronic-mail access points. This analysis will include a review of several Websites providing helpful information concerning the 1996 election. During the past few weeks, the author has traveled the information superhighway in search of Websites which focus upon political campaigns and candidates. First, let us begin by examining four of the more prominent political Websites including those offered by the Democratic Party, Dole for President, The White House, and C-SPAN. The Clinton-Gore Web page is linked up with the Democratic Party page and other elements dealing with the Presidency are integrated within the White House website. In analyzing each of these sites, this perspective will focus upon four key areas of examination:

1) The structure of the site, 2) The major informational outlets provided, 3) The quality of the content presented, and 4) The overall applications for future research using that website.

DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL COMMITTEE: WWW.democrats.org

The Democratic Party has operated a website since 1994. In preparation for the 1996 elections they substantially upgraded the options and links available. Late in 1995, the Democratic Party linked their web page with the official White House Web Page. Unfortunately, the Republican Party threatened to complain to the Federal Communications Commission because they felt White House publications should, as taxpayer funded entities, remain at least

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somewhat nonpartisan in tone. The Democratic Party home page is also integrated with elements of the Clinton-Gore webpage and State Democratic party websites. Several Democratic members of Congress and the U. S. Senate maintain E-mail outlets with which constituents may communicate directly with them.

The Democratic Party website provides a homepage listing for a number of in-depth file features including "hat's Hot," "The Donkey Stomp," "21st Century Express," "Convention-1996," and "Get Active." "What's Hot" offers daily news updates, a reprinting of the official Party platform, press release updates from the Clinton-Gore campaign and the Democratic National Committee. "The Donkey Stomp" contains articles and subchapters which attack the Republican Presidential ticket and prominent Republicans, "Newt" is a separate subfile within the chapter, while extolling the virtues of Bill Clinton and Al Gore. "Convention-'96" contains party platform information, reprints of speeches given at the Chicago enclave, Reports from the "21st Century Express" train campaign, and the remnants of an audio-video structure which allowed web browsers a realtime picture of the convention in progress. Unfortunately, to fully access the multimedia features a user needs to possess the right equipment including speakers, a sound card, a VGA high dimension monitor and a high speed modem (28.8Kbps). "Get Active" provides cybernauts with an opportunity to register as a volunteer, join the Democratic Party, or donate

money to the National Committee. Again, full use of this feature requires the applicant utilize a secure web browser, such as Netscape, in order to protect the personal data (e.g. credit card numbers or checking account information) which would necessarily be transmitted as part of the transaction.

A large percentage of the information presented in the Democratic Web Page is blatant political propaganda. There is very little information, particularly in the "Donkey Stomp" and "Hot News" subfiles, which one could utilize as serious documentation for a research paper or dissertation. Conversely, there are plenty of speech transcripts and campaign addresses (e.g. "Convention-'96") which could be utilized by communication scholars focusing upon a variety of interrelated areas including political communication, Presidential rhetoric, argumentation and persuasion theory. The most entertaining elements of this website are the "21st Century Express" and "Donkey Stomp" sections because they provide a humorous perspective concerning the sublime nature of American politics. For instance, Bill Clinton's campaign address rarely changed during the 15 whistle stops he made while traveling by train to Chicago. But, it is the salutatory remarks which open each speech that remind us of the grassroots nature of politics. To hear Bill Clinton speak, during the train trip, one might come to believe that each and every person the President introduced along the way was a close friend or a beloved neighbor. From a

technical and content standpoint the Democratic website is still far behind the Dole campaign in terms of presentational style and overall quality of content.

DOLE FOR PRESIDENT: WWW.Dole96.com

The Dole-Kemp website is a dynamic and interesting place to browse and research elements of the 1996 political campaign. The GOP files are also filled with unfiltered political jabs and attacks aimed at Bill Clinton, but there are also subfiles which provide general data useful to anyone seeking background information concerning the Republican presidential ticket. It offers several major subfiles including "About the Team," "Dole Interactive," "The Dole Agenda," "Get Involved," "Newsroom" and "On the Campaign Trail."

"About the Team" provides detailed biographical information concerning the Dole and Kemp families. There is extensive background information on everyone associated with the two nominees including Leader, the Dole family dog, who is featured on a Website of his very own! "Dole Interactive" offers viewers an opportunity to play a variety of games associated with tidbits about Bob Dole and the campaign. You can even create your own "Bob Dole for President" poster by selecting the background, graphics, and slogan of your choice. "Get Involved" features sidebar options for those wishing to volunteer, join the Republican Party, or donate money to the Dole campaign. You can even sign up for E-mail updates from

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the RNC concerning breaking news about the campaign (e.g. The Doles will be featured on a Barbara Walters' special next Monday on ABC). "On the Campaign Trail" highlights stories related to the travels of Bob Dole and Jack Kemp. This subfile also offers users access to copies of recent campaign addresses. There is also an interactive map of the United States with which users may chronicle the states and cities Bob Dole has visited since the campaign began in Iowa last January. The "Dole Agenda" contains an extensive catalogue of policy statements concerning a wide array of domestic and foreign policy issues ranging from Abortion to the V-chip. It also includes subfiles explaining "Why Bob Dole?" for President, detailing the "Dole Economic Plan," and a highly partisan "State by State" review of Bill Clinton's "failed" Presidency.

Overall, the Dole for President website is much more engaging and information-dense than the DNC's home page. The site contains far more audio-video windows and the developers clearly possess a sense of humor as evidenced by the "Leader" weblink and the game options featured in "Dole Interactive." There is plenty of information about the Republican nominees' stands on the issues. An interesting contrast exists if one compares Dole's "State by State" feature against the White House website listing of Clinton's Presidential accomplishments. These parallel features would be extremely informative for communication researchers seeking to analyze the major points of clash between the two candidates.

THE WHITE HOUSE: WWW.whitehouse.gov/wh

This website allows you to write E-mail to President Clinton or First Lady Hillary Rodham-Clinton. It also is full of helpful biographical information concerning the first and second families. The Executive Office of the President maintains the homepage and they have attempted to blend historical elements of the White House with positive data regarding the Clinton Presidency. In some respects, the webpage is schizophrenic because from subfile to subfile there is great variance between the tone and direction of the information presented. The site includes "What's News," "A Citizens' Handbook," "White House History Tours," "A Virtual Library," and the "Briefing Room."

Most of these subfiles are designed for tourists or pedestrian observers who simply want to experience the ambience of Washington D.C. from a laptop perspective. "What's News" offers a sampling of recent Presidential press releases, policy statements, and transcripts of executive legislation (e.g. executive orders concerning abortion procedures or American policy toward Iraq). "A Citizen's Handbook" provides user information concerning steps to accessing websites sponsored by other government agencies including each of the major cabinet departments and governmental organs (e.g. the U.S. Senate). In April of 1996, Senator John Ashcroft of Missouri opened his own homepage in order to encourage constituents to sign a petition supporting Federal term limits

legislation. Senator Ashcroft viewed the website opening as historic and concluded "innovative ideas and new ways of doing business will play a significant role in November's elections as people seek leaders who recognize the opportunities of tomorrow (U. S. Newswire, April 10, 1996). Senator Ashcroft's website is connected with the White House through the Citizen's Handbook subfile or you can go directly to the U.S. Senate homepage (www.senate.gov). "White House History Tours" provides access to the historical side of the Presidential residence and is extremely popular with school groups and tourists planning a visit to Washington D. C. "The Virtual Library" provides backfiles of Presidential and Vice Presidential addresses and press briefings from the last two years. The subfile "Briefing Room" contains a substantial amount of political data including a biography of President Clinton, a State by State interactive record of Presidential accomplishments, A detailed summary of "Recent Presidential Initiatives," and a backfile of transcripts from recent Presidential press briefings.

The "Virtual Library" is probably the most worthwhile subfile offered within the White House website because of its emphasis on political issues and Presidential policies. The other subfiles are helpful to gain a perspective on major policymaking activities at the White House or to learn about the Presidential history associated with the First Family's official residence. The website

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contains a large volume of graphics and to fully access these elements browsers will need the proper equipment (VGA or Super VGA monitor and audio capabilities).

C-SPAN: WWW.c-span.com

This website is clearly the most interconnected cyberlocale within the Internet as all three major political parties and a host of political organizations (e.g. National Commission on Presidential Debates) are available to fans of C-SPAN (Lexis-Nexis, 1996). The C-SPAN network website, cable-satellite public affairs, is sponsored by the American cable industry. It is a generally non-partisan organization which strives to serve as a neutral medium of information between Washington political operatives and the public. Consequently, their website offers links to the Democratic, Republican, and Reform party homepages and a wide array of other organizations including several major "thinktanks."
The C-SPAN site also offers viewers an opportunity to peruse the major sections of the Washington Post and the Washington Times before those publications are distributed. Most major newspapers now have webpages and they are a tremendous source of political data concerning election races in specific regions of the country (e.g. WWW.Chicago.tribune.com or WWW.usatoday.com).

The C-SPAN homepage offers users a view of upcoming programs on the network, a schedule of Congressional and Senate legislative activities ("Congress Today"), and a discussion group which reviews

major political developments ("Washington Journal"). It also offers a review of "Booknotes," "C-SPAN in the classroom," "C-SPAN Weekly Radio Journal," the "C-SPAN Store," and the most valuable subfile for those researching the Presidential election ("Campaign 96.").

The "Washington Journal" contains a review of discussion content presented on C-SPAN's three political notebook programs which are featured throughout the day. The Washington morning segment offers a review and discussion of newspaper headlines from around the country. Callers phone in and discuss the top headlines from their respective home-town papers with the program's host and alternating guests. This practice has now been copied by a number of major network programs including those featured on ABC and MSNBC. The other subfiles link tangentially to political issues or elements of election coverage (e.g. "Booknotes" routinely conducts interviews with individual authors who have covered nuances of the Clinton White House such as Bob Woodward).

"Campaign 96" is the major source of political news on the C-SPAN website including coverage of conventions, Presidential debate news, Road to Whitehouse features dating back to the primary season, highlights of state political races, and links to dozens of other related websites. This website is clearly the most comprehensive and connected locale for those interested in political coverage on the Internet. Some of the C-SPAN generated

subfiles lack in-depth detail, but the links to other sites more than make up for that shortcoming. Moving around the C-SPAN page is not particularly difficult. Be aware, C-SPAN utilizes a lot of graphic click on items as the gateway for file openings so browsers need to avoid hacking away at the blue lines because they are not coded for entrance. Overall, the C-SPAN site offers a great starting point for anyone interested in researching issues and personalities associated with the American political system. The quality of their own information and the many weblinks they offer provide the user with an excellent library of election year background information and issue analysis.

CONCLUSION

The expansion of the Internet and the World Wide Web, in particular, provides students and researchers of all stripes with a "banquet table" of information and news pertaining to a plethora of issues (Seattle Post-Intelligencer, August, 6, 1996). This report was developed through the examination of over 15 websites, and the of cyberspace based research sources (e.g. CNN All Politics, New York Times Index, and U.S. Newswire).

The purpose of this analysis was to determine whether it was possible to conduct political research, of any quality, on the Internet. Clearly, it is possible to conduct such research when the user knows where to search for political data. The candidate websites contain some useful data, but the research must wade

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through a number of frivilous items in order to find them. Naturally, the unfiltered nature of the Internet provides political parties and other organizations with an unparalleled opportunity to engage in people to people communication (Columbia Journalism Review, 1996, September/October). The best sites are provided by news organizations and independent organizations (e.g. CNN, CSPAN) because they offer links to substantive data without the adornments of partisan sloganeering and institutional cheerleading.

In closing, there are four cautionary observations which need to be issued concerning using the Internet for extensive political research. First, the full website experience is not fully accessible unless the user possesses some fairly expensive equipment including sound boxes, soundcards, and upgraded monitors. In addition, the process of wading through a website can be particularly time-consuming and frustrating for fledgling users of Internet connected systems. In some topic areas, there are simply so many opportunities to access other websites that an individual could literally get lost while traveling the information superhighway. For students and researchers working on a deadline this structural barrier is a major obstacle to full access of the Internet for investigative purposes (CJS, 1996, September/October).

A second problem with Internet research involves determining where some of the data originated from. For example, the New York

Times Syndicate Index integrates articles from over 30 different publications from across the country. In utilizing data from these publications, it is sometimes difficult to determine whether citation credit should be given to the index or the originating publication (APA Publication Manual 4th Ed., 1995). The shared, communal nature of the Internet may minimize the significance of this problem over time, but it still trends nightmares for individuals involved in information gathering and academic research activities which demand full and proper citation.

A third concern involves the veracity of argument claims presented on the Internet. The Democratic Party website features dozens of claims concerning the candidates record's and very few of those claims are supported by objective and original sources. Consequently, students and researchers may be basing qualitative claims upon biased and poorly grounded suppositions concerning the nature of candidate positions on issues and their overall record in certain policy areas.

A final concern centers upon the nature of the Internet and the revision and updating of the data presented therein. How often are incorrect stories and data revised by the sponsors of specific webpages? Simply because a site has been accessed by its sponsor does not mean that any substantive changes were made in revising or editing incorrect statements incorporated in specific Webpage subfiles. Researchers need to know that information filed on the

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Web may be just as uncorroborated and substance as those generated on-deadline through the print and traditional electronic media.

Despite these reservations, the World Wide Web services do offer an exciting and dynamic pathway to information related to a wide array of subjects. Similarly, usenet listpages and subject groups provide Internet users with a one-on-one opportunity to seek clarification concerning the information presented on various Websites. As the Internet continues to develop, many of these source and information revision problems will be worked out. Until then, however, Internet users must be prepared for a slow, burdensome trip along the information superhighway in order to access the most valuable data available in their respective areas of interest.

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